



BY ROBERT HICHENS.

My friend Curtis has one great charm. He is a superb listener. When one is telling him a story he does not interject what a word-coining acquaintance of mine once called "acclamatory oh's" whenever a point is reached. I confess I like Curtis, and I believe him to be a man of considerable intelligence. The first story I ever told him was the history of Professor Frederick James, whose strange eclipse set all London talking. Now, few people knew the truth about James. I am one of those few, for I was the Professor's oldest friend and confidant. Curtis and I were sitting one night in a cosy corner of the smoking-room of the "Fireside Club." It was winter in Bond Street, and we drew our armchairs to the roaring flames. While we thawed I told Curtis this story, and he listened in a manner I can only call magnificent.

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Well, Curtis, as to poor James. You know perfectly well what a brilliant fellow he was. During his hey-day he made, I suppose, a new discovery nearly once a week. That must have been his average. He smothered the world with scientific benefits. He gave us new atmospheres, new explosives, new methods of movement, with a prodigality that amounted almost to excess.

He was the most level-headed, self-possessed man I ever met. That is what makes his story so extraordinary and incomprehensible. He was a confirmed bachelor, and

was lacking in the affectional direction, though he was a good friend. I remember once, when I asked him why he didn't marry, he answered: "I haven't time for any nonsense of that kind." Yes, James was by no means romantic. Calm, with nerves of iron, he devoted himself to labour without pause and without distress. Naturally, therefore, I was very much surprised one evening when I called on him at his house in Hyde Park Place to find him sitting in front of the fire in his study, with his hands before him doing nothing.

He jumped up rather suddenly at my entrance, and turned round to face me. "Oh," he said, "it's you, is it? Come in."

I thought him looking fatigued, and said so.

"I had a bad night," he answered shortly.

"Thinking over the lecture you're going to deliver in Paris next week?" I asked.

"No," he replied, "that's all arranged. I could deliver it to you at this moment verbatim. Well, sit down."

I sat down. So did he, and stared hard into the fire, without another word. Supposing that he must be on the verge of making his weekly new discovery, I did not disturb him, but quietly lit my pipe and started smoking. All at once he said abruptly:

"D'you think I'm an attractive man?"

Such a question, coming from such a man, astounded me. It was so dreadfully out of character.

"Bless my soul!" I ejaculated, coming

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towards him. "What makes you ask me? Do you mean attractive to women?"

"That's what I don't know," he replied, still staring at the fire.

"Don't know!"

"Let's say—d'you think I'm attractive, that there's anything about me which might draw a human being, or an animal, irresistibly to me?"

"Whether you desired it or not?"

"Exactly! Or—no, let us say definitely, if I did not desire it."

I sat pursing up my lips.

"There might be, of course," I said, after a moment. "I can very well understand women running after you. Your reputation, your great name—"

"Yes, yes," he interrupted rather irritably. "I know all that, I know."

He twisted his large hands, that could do such delicate work, together, and drew his forehead into a frown.

"I imagine it would be very disagreeable to be liked, to be run after—that is the usual expression, I believe—by anything one objected to," he continued.

And now he half turned in his chair, and looked towards me.

"Any thing?" I ejaculated.

"Well, well—anyone. I imagine nothing could be more unpleasant."

I laughed gently.

"Some men would rather be run after by the Devil than left to themselves and ignored," I answered.

James nodded his head moodily.

"I don't at all know what to make of it," he said. "I'll just tell you the facts, and you must tell me your conclusions. About a week ago, one night, after a day of hard work—but no harder than usual—I went to the front door to get a breath of air. I didn't put on hat or coat, just stood on the step as I was. My mind was still full of my work, I remember. It was a rather dark night, but not very. The hour was about eleven or a quarter past. I was staring across at the Park, and presently I found that my eyes were directed towards somebody who was sitting, back to me, on one of the benches. I saw the person—if it was

a person—through the railings."

"If it was a person!" I ejaculated.

"Wait a minute. I say that because it was too dark for me to know. I merely saw something black on the bench rising into view above the level of the back of the seat. I couldn't say it was man, woman, or child. But something



"That's what I don't know," he replied, still staring at the fire.

there was, and I found that I was looking at it."

"I see."

"Gradually I also found that my thoughts became fixed upon this thing or person. I began to wonder, first, what it was doing there; next, what it was thinking; lastly, what it was like."

"Some beggar asleep," I said.

"Yes, I said that to myself. Still, I was taken with an extraordinary interest about this object, so great an interest that I got my

hat, and crossed the road to go into the Park. As you know, there's an entrance almost opposite to my house. I crossed the road, passed through the narrow gate in the railings, went up to the seat, and found there was nothing on it."

"Were you looking at it as you walked?"

"Part of the time, but I removed my eyes from it just as I passed through the gate, because there was a row going on a little way off, and I turned for an instant in that direction. When I saw that the seat was vacant, I was seized by a most absurd sensation of disappointment, almost of anger. I stopped and looked about me to see if anything was moving away, but I could see nothing. It was a cold night, and there were few people about. Still feeling very much disappointed, I retraced my steps to my house. When I got there I discovered that during my short absence I had left the hall door open—half open."

"Rather imprudent in London."

"Yes, I had no idea I had done so till I got back. However, I was only away three minutes or so."

"Of course."

"Nobody would have gone in."

"Oh, I suppose not."

"Would they?"

"It isn't at all likely. Besides, if they had, you'd have caught them."

James cleared his throat.

"That's just it," he said. "Now we come to it."

"What—you did catch somebody?"

"I'll tell you. I'm not imaginative, as you know, but hardly had I entered the hall when I felt certain that somebody had got into the house during my absence. I felt convinced of it, and not only that, I also felt convinced that the intruder was the very person I had dimly seen sitting upon the seat in the Park. It seemed to me that we had simultaneously formed the project of interviewing one another—had simultaneously set out to put the project into execution.

"I was so certain of this that I walked hastily into this room expecting to find this person awaiting me. But there was no one. I then went to the dining-room. No one. I explored the whole house. You know how

small it is, how easily one can go all over it. I looked into every room without exception—excusing myself to the two servants who were still up, having supper in the kitchen, and who were surprised at my advent. I found nobody. But I returned to my study still entirely convinced that somebody had entered, and was still in the house."

"But, my dear James—"

"I know what you want to say. Now do wait. I am also convinced that the person has not left the house, and is at this moment in it."

He spoke with absolute sincerity. I looked into his face and met his eyes.

"No," he said, as if in reply to an uttered question, "I'm perfectly sane, I assure you. The whole matter seems almost as incredible to me as to you; but, as you know, I never quarrel with facts, however strange—I merely try to examine into them thoroughly. I have already consulted a doctor and been pronounced in perfect bodily health."

He paused, as if expecting me to speak. I said nothing. I was aware that he had more to tell me, and I was right.

"I felt that night positive that somebody had entered the house and remained in it," he continued, "and my conviction grew. I went to bed as usual, and, contrary to my expectation, slept as well as I always had. Yet directly I woke up in the morning I knew that my household had been increased by one."

"May I interrupt you for one moment? How did you know it?"

"Merely by my mental sensation. I can only say that I was perfectly conscious of a new presence within my house, close to me."

"It's very strange," I remarked, rather feebly.

"It is. But what followed is stranger still."

"There's more?"

"Yes, certainly. That morning, when I came down to breakfast, I looked sharply at the faces of the maids. They were as placid as usual. It was evident to me that their minds were in no way distressed. After breakfast I sat down to work, all the while ceaselessly conscious of the fact of this intruder upon my privacy. Nevertheless, I

laboured for several hours, waiting for any development that might occur to clear away the mysterious obscurity of this event. After working for some hours I was obliged to go out to attend a lecture. I, therefore, took my coat and hat, opened my door, and stepped on to the pavement. I was instantly aware that I was no longer intruded upon, and this, although I was now in the street, surrounded by people. Consequently I felt convinced that the being in my house must be thinking of me, even spying upon me."

"How ghostly!" I could not help exclaiming.

"I begin to think that," James said, with a certain cold dreariness. "I begin to think that, but I did not think it then. I was entirely puzzled, and keenly interested. I did not feel in any way alarmed. I delivered my lecture with my usual ease, and returned home at evening. On entering the house again, I was perfectly conscious that the intruder was still there. That night I dined alone, and spent the hours after dinner in reading a scientific work, in which I was deeply interested. While I read, however, I never for one moment lost the knowledge that some mind—very attentive to me—was within hail of mine. I will say more than this. The sensation constantly increased, and, by the time I got up to go to bed, I had come to a very strange conclusion."

"What? What was it?"

"That whoever had entered my house during my short absence in the Park was more than interested in me."

"More than interested in you?"

"Was fond, or was becoming fond of me."

Again I began to wonder if James was not a victim to overwork, if his mind was not unhinged. I said nothing, however, and kept my eyes on the fire. He went on:

"This thought having been borne in upon me, I again went through the house, examining every nook and corner. I found nothing. But I went to bed, still aware of the intruder."

"My dear James, it must be fancy," I began, mightily impressed, nevertheless, by his manner, and full of increasing discomfort that almost amounted to apprehension.

"No," he said. "That night I felt it."

"What?"

"That night, as I was going up to bed, I felt something accompanying me and nestling up against me."

"Good God! How horrible!" I exclaimed. "What was it?"

"It seemed to be a human being. It seemed, I say; and I mean that the effect upon me was rather that of human contact than anything else. But I could see nothing, could hear nothing. Only, twice I felt this gentle push against me, as if to coax me and to attract my attention. Now, for the first time, I began to feel a certain alarm. I hurried into my bedroom, and locked the door. I slept very brokenly during the night, and got up early. After making a poor breakfast—I knew that this extra member of my household still remained with me—I tried to immerse myself in work. But I failed miserably. I was conscious that I was watched—by affectionate eyes, by eyes of solicitude."

"Ah!" I interrupted. "Now I understand why you asked me last night whether I thought there was anything about you that might draw a human being or an animal irresistibly to you."

"Precisely! Since that day when I tried in vain to work, I have been increasingly conscious of this presence in my house. I often actually feel someone, or something, pressing closely against me, always—mind you—with tenderness, with gentleness. But the worst of it is that the effect of this upon me is becoming terribly disagreeable. I am growing to hate, to abhor, this presence!"

Suddenly James showed excitement. His face grew paler than its wont, and an expression of acute distress came into his usually calm, keen eyes.

"You consider yourself haunted," I said, much moved.

"I have never believed in any nonsense of that kind, as you know," he answered. "I simply state a fact which I cannot understand, and which is beginning to be very painful to me. There is someone here, but whereas most so-called hauntings have been described to me as sinister and inimical, what I am conscious of is that I am admired, loved. This is distinctly horrible to me. Fenwick, distinctly horrible."

He ceased, and I was silent. I did not know what to say, what to believe. I have no doubt I looked embarrassed, for James suddenly said :

"Well, we'll say no more about this now. Let's talk of other things—about my coming visit to Paris."

Well, Curtis, you know about the Paris episode. James stood up to address a great assembly of French scientific men. He appeared composed, master of himself, although he looked pale and like a man who had been sleeping badly, or not at all. He spoke fluently for about a quarter of an hour. Then he was observed to become uneasy, to falter, and to glance about like a man apprehensive, or in severe distress. He even stopped once or twice in his speech, and seemed unable to go on, to remember what he wished to say. But, with an obvious effort, he continued. Then he edged furtively along the platform, as if pushed by someone from the right side, and finally he struck out with his hands, uttered a loud, harsh cry, and fainted.

I'll tell you why this was, as he told it to me. He was ill in Paris for two days, and was then moved home. On his arrival he telegraphed to me to come at once to see him. I drove to Hyde Park Place, and found him sitting by the fire in his study, very much altered, full of discomposure, and of a nervousness that was pitiful. I began to express my sympathy, but he stopped me at once.

"I know all that," he said. "This Paris affair—" he faltered and stopped.

"You ought never to have gone," I said ; "you were not fit."

"I was perfectly fit," he contradicted, "only I was pursued by that invisible creature."

I began to feel convinced that poor James' brain must be turned. And yet there was nothing about him that suggested insanity, only what he said—only these repeated declarations of his on the subject of this presence, this being that pursued him. He

now writhed in his chair, and said, in a hopeless voice of lamentation :

"Fenwick, this being—whatever it is—loves me ; whether like a dog, a slave, or an emancipated human being I don't know, and



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don't care. The nature of its love is not obvious to me, nor does it concern me. What does concern me is that it has returned here with me, that it will not leave me, that"—he gave a sudden, sharp exclamation—"now, as I sit here, it is nestling up to me, it is fawning upon me, like an animal or a sycophant, or a woman who has been beaten and still caresses the brute who ill-uses her. Man, man, can't you feel that it's here?"

"No," I said.

In truth, although my nerves were greatly worked upon by James' asseverations, I was not conscious that a third person was in the room with us.

His health continued to grow daily worse. There was no organic disease of any kind. The doctors were baffled. (I insisted on

calling them in, despite James' strong opposition.) James' relations were in despair. I alone knew that the man was ill, was actually dying from fright. The persecution of this being, imaginary or other-



"I cannot withdraw, I cannot be alone."

wise—at that time I believed it to be imaginary—was positively killing him. He could neither eat nor sleep, but dwelt in perpetual apprehension, and grew thinner, whiter, weaker day by day. His nervous system was entirely wrecked, and at the last he screamed out in terror if he was left alone for a single moment. And yet, to the very end, he persisted in his belief that the creature which had gained access to his house meant him no harm, but, on the contrary, sought him out of affection, was led to him solely by some amazing attraction which he unwillingly exercised over it.

"If it would hate me," he exclaimed to me one day, when I was sitting by the chair on which he was reclining, "I could bear it. If it would attack me, if it would do me some dreadful harm, I should become a man again. I should be braced up to oppose it—to fight

against it. But this gentleness, this abominable solicitude, this worship, which it accords to me, I cannot endure. What does it want of me? What does it demand of me? It nestles to me. It leans against me. I feel its touch trembling round my heart, as if it sought to number my pulsations, to find out the inmost secrets of my affections. No privacy is left to me." He rose excitedly. "I cannot withdraw, I cannot be alone, unwatched, untouched, unworshipped for even one brief second; Fenwick, I shall die of this, I shall die!" and he sank back exhausted.

I endeavoured to calm him, I endeavoured to reason with him. But I grew to know that it was useless, and I grew to believe that these words of his would all too soon be realised. It was impossible to be with him and not to see that he was dying; that, unless this creature—if it existed—could be got rid of, or James' belief in it—if it did not exist—be destroyed, his days were indeed numbered.

I racked my brains to hit upon some plan for re-assuring my poor friend, but none came to me, and I could only sit and watch the terror in James' eyes grow more appalling night by night, the waxen pallor of his cheeks increase, until he looked

more like a corpse stamped with a terrible living expression of fixed horror, than like a breathing, thinking man.

At last his life seemed to hang by a mere thread, and I anticipated that soon the mysterious tragedy would be over and James beyond the reach of this affection which was murdering him. One night—it was early summer, and very warm—I sat beside his sofa, for he would be dressed each day, and lie in his study. The hour was close upon twelve, but James could not sleep, and I had a fancy that if I left him to seek rest myself I should not see him alive again.

I was trying to read a book, and James was, as usual, staring apprehensively on all sides, with the passion of some blind man deluded into the belief that by his own furious and continued effort he will attain sight. I knew well that he sought to pierce the veil

of the invisible, and have knowledge of the creature that loved him to his undoing. I turned the leaves of my book slowly, and listened to the soft wind in the trees that murmured behind the house. Suddenly James spoke in a high and keen voice, full of suppressed excitement.

"Fenwick," he said, "Fenwick!"

Hastily I put down my book and turned to him.

"Yes. What is it?"

An amazing ecstasy shone in his eyes, which were fastened upon me.

"It wants to leave me!" he cried. "It wants to go!"

A ray of hope shot through me. Was the persecution of this poor fellow close upon an end?

"Go—go!" he continued. "Don't lose a moment! Let it out! Open this door—open the hall door! I feel—I feel that it will return the way it came. Make haste!"

To soothe him I sprang up and obeyed. I ran to the study door, and flung it wide open. Then I cast a glance back at James. He was half sitting up on the sofa, supported by cushions, his eyes glaring with eagerness and expectation. As I turned he made a furious gesture towards the hall with his thin hands. I hurried out to open the front door. The passage was dark. I stumbled, and nearly fell, and as I did so I fancied I heard a quick cry from the room behind me. But I did not pause. I flung the hall door wide open to the soft, summer night. Then I returned to the study hastily.

Curtis, when I got there my poor friend was fallen back dead, a shocking look of horror upon his face. But, now, this is the strange thing. When I had partially recovered from my stupor at this sad catastrophe, I returned, going silently, to close the hall door which I had left wide open. I reached it, and had my hand upon it to push it outwards when, I declare to you, that an impulse seized me to go forth upon the step, and look across the road into the Park.

I did so. The night was lit by a young

moon, and, gazing through the railings, my eyes fell upon the bench beyond them. Curtis, something was sitting upon this bench, hunched, or huddled together very strangely. I remembered James' description of the coming of that thing to his house, and a sensation of horror-stricken curiosity—I can only call my feeling that—came over me. Had the creature, then, done its work, and gone back whence it had come?

I wavered a moment upon the doorstep. Then I moved down, and crossed the road, still with my eyes fixed upon this black or dark object so strangely leaning upon the bench. I could not tell what it was like, but I felt that it was unlike anything with which my eyes were acquainted. Yes, I felt



My friend was fallen back dead.

this. I reached the opposite path, and was just about to pass through the narrow gate, when my arm was touched, and I started and turned round. A police constable was eyeing me suspiciously.

"What are you up to?" he said.

And, then, suddenly I was aware that I was in slippers, that I had no hat upon my head, and that my appearance was doubtless that of a man in some great stress of mind.

"It's all right," I replied, thrusting some money into the constable's hand. Then, breaking roughly away from him, I hastened towards the bench, cursing the fact that my attention had been thus for an instant distracted from it.

Well, Curtis, when I reached it nothing was there. The former experience of poor

James had been exactly repeated in my case. And, yet—laugh at me, if you like—I feel convinced that had not the constable disturbed me, I should have discovered the secret of the horror which caused my friend's death. I know it. James spoke the truth from beginning to end. Laugh at me, if you like—I know it is so.

* * * * *

But Curtis did not laugh. He only took his pipe from his mouth, and heaved a long sigh of expansive appreciation.

I like Curtis.



QUESTION.

Do you remember how in this old garden
I craved to taste your red mouth's luscious
fruit?
And you were proud, and still your heart
would harden
Against my suit?
It seemed that day to my so sad complaining
Life held no good,
Sithence my lips were too coarse for
profaning
Such elfin food;
And yet, to-day, I have it for the asking:
The whole, rich store;
And, in the warmth of your caresses basking,
I ask no more.
Tell me wherein, then, something more than
human
I now appear?
Or are you less divine,—and more a woman?
Which is it, dear?

ANSWER.

I find my chiefest good in my own
treason
Against myself, as governor of my
state,
And, being woman, need to give no
reason
For love or hate.
It was my whim to turn away unheeding
Your fond appeal;
It is my whim to listen to your pleading.
As low you kneel.
Fanciful, was I,—wayward, and capricious?
I do not know;
In lovers' wars forgiveness is delicious;
Come, prove it so;
But ask me not my reasons to discover;
When you are near
It is enough to have you for my lover.
I love you, dear.

CRANSTOUN METCALFE.